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THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

By REV. DAVID BEATON, D.D.,
Pastor Lincoln Park Congregational Church, Chicago.

IT is an important thing to connect the everyday incidents and natural laws of the common life of man with a divine controlling purpose and moral authority, to show that the lives studied are the lives of real men and women, but at the same time reveal to us the purpose of God and the laws of the moral and spiritual life. One cannot easily exhibit the lives of the men and women of the Bible as perfectly natural, without seeming to rob them of their divine element. Yet this is just what the teacher is called to do with the lives of the saints and heroes, the poets and statesmen, the humble and the mighty, who form the galaxy of biblical history.

The boys and girls in the Sunday school and in the home are demanding the explanation of the incidents connected with the lives of these men and women; for their interest passes from the mere incidents to the explanation of the incidents. Because the life story of this saint, this patriot, this hero, is in the Bible, we attach a peculiar interest and authority to it. We say this life is a supreme example; this truth has binding power over the heart and conscience; this incident shows that God was working in and through the man. This is what we mean by scriptural authority; not some general authority in the clouds, but the authority of a particular deed or teaching. The pupil immediately asks, why should I accept this teaching? Why should I bow to this authority? What is there in this life-story that binds my heart and conscience? You must then furnish him a valid reason or lose his interest and respect; you may even incur some danger of getting his contempt, for there is nothing that rouses the contempt of the young like the failure to establish the claim of moral and religious authority we make over their lives.

This demand on the part of the pupil exposes the teacher to two kinds of danger. One may be described as the danger of naturalism; the other that of supernaturalism. One lays emphasis on the natural ability, the genius, the courage of the men described in the Bible; the

other lays emphasis on the power of God, the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit; and in each case a distorted image of the fact is presented to the pupil.

The teacher who leans to the merely natural explanation of all events is in danger of eliminating the divine presence and authority from the human life, and so of robbing the Bible of its unique moral and spiritual character as a revelation of truths springing from sources beyond the reach of the human intellect or the aspirations of the unaided human soul. We do not say that he robs the Bible of the supernatural, for he may say, "this natural life of faith and love is the manifestation and guarantee of the supernatural;" but we draw attention to the ordinary use of the words, and point out that the over-emphasis of the natural process tends to impress the mind with the idea that there is nothing beyond, no other objective fact or reality in the universe that enters into the question. The story has its human side—the genius, the courage, the self-sacrifice of the man or woman. Then, too, the simple, natural explanation of how the deed was done or the truth taught has a wonderful fascination for many minds, and is a vital and profound factor of the truth, as we shall presently see. But it is only one side of the great moral and spiritual equation we are now trying to solve, and when put forward as all the truth or as a sufficient explanation of the truth, it becomes a distorting and falsifying half-truth, doubly dangerous at this period of the youth's moral and spiritual development.

Indeed, it is just because the naturalness of the facts are of tremendous significance as the ground of a rational faith that they are dangerous when put forth as the entire solution; it is true, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. It leaves us a torso, a mere mutilated fragment of the noble figure of truth. It leaves the growing mind without an adequate explanation of the presence of the divine in the human, and therefore without an authoritative leadership in the moral and spiritual realm; and that, too, when the ship of life is setting out on its great voyage, and when it most needs a divine Captain at the helm.

On the other hand, the teacher who leans to the supernatural explanation of all events is in danger of eliminating the reality and the human interest from the life-story, and so of robbing the Bible of its genuine humanity as a record of the moral and spiritual achievements of men and women of like passions with ourselves whose faith and love are grounded in the experiences of the human soul. This

arises when we teach that these life-stories in the Bible were lived in a world continually being exempted from the operations of the ordinary laws of nature ; as if the actors were supernaturally inspired to utter divine wisdom, or marvelously endowed with power to overcome impossible obstructions, and in a word presents them as moving, thinking, and feeling in a world of miracles of power and saintliness. Thus we create an unreal, and to the modern child an impossible, atmosphere of myth and miracle in which these biblical personages live and move and have their being. Their characters may be shown to be pure, their deeds noble, and the lessons contained in them of vital import to us; but we have broken the line of connection between these heroes and heroines of the ancient world and the interest and sympathy of the young people of our own time. They know nothing by experience of such miraculous interferences with the laws of nature on their own behalf. Such a world is strange, and alien ; they would regard its manifestations now with instinctive dread and horror.

This evil arises from a false emphasis or overstraining of the supernatural, from seeking it and citing it as the easiest explanation of the wonderful things we read about in the Bible. In this we disregard the rule of all scholars that the miraculous instrumentality is to be assumed only in the last extremity, when all other explanations fail. But it is so easy to say, "God did it;" or, "the Holy Spirit taught him this truth." And it looks so reverent and believing to say, "God was with him and he could not fail." It seems to honor God and the Bible to use these words that laugh at impossibilities and go smashing through the facts of life. But it is the sign of intellectual shallowness and moral weakness ; it is the sure evidence of unbelief in the divine unity of the universe, and it reacts, as all such subterfuges do which evade the inexorable demands of the reasonable spirit, by making the victim of such teaching either a fanatic or a skeptic.

If the false emphasis of naturalism has robbed life of its spiritual mystery and moral authority, leaving us only the good example of lives which were yet full of errors and imperfections, the false emphasis of supernaturalism has made these lives magical and fanatical, breaking the bond of human community between them and our own lives. It thus makes the spiritual mystery transcendental and unrelated, and the moral authority arbitrary and extraneous. The mind of the pupil gets no ground for either a human interest or a willing obedience. It is an unreal world that is presented to him as the ground of the most vital action of his life. He comes to think of those saints and heroes

as puppets pulled by strings, as mythical heroes, and impossible saints, whose temptations were unreal and whose example is meaningless for ordinary men. Meanwhile the truth involved in the whole history as a divine and authoritative principle governing life has evaporated in this exhausted atmosphere of unreality. The one-sided naturalistic explanation and the equally one-sided supernatural solution are both too easy and too obvious, and therefore most likely to be false.

There is truth in both kinds of explanations, but they must be carefully combined, for they are complementary, not exclusive.

Revelation is based upon the natural experiences of human life. It comes out of them ; it would be of no human interest or value without them. It is surely sufficient to bear in mind that God has given this revelation, not by the lives of angels but of men, and in the most normal relations of humanity, the family and the state ; in the experiences of love, of fatherhood and motherhood, of king and subject, of peasant and prince, of poet and mechanic, of hero and saint. And above all, to crown and consummate this revelation, the Son of God was made flesh, so that he might continue the record of revelation to us as a man, that the holiest and noblest of all lives might also be the most natural and closely connected with our own.

When the pupil gets hold of this aspect of revelation he sees the historical reality of it, he knows that the man lived, that the deed was actually done, that such a man had faith in God and acted accordingly, having to suffer amid doubt and fear just like himself. He gets the picture of a genuine life, without magical interferences with the laws of nature around it, having to solve its own problems and work out its own salvation by the ordinary gifts and graces of a virtuous nature and a loving heart. He sees the man victorious through the exercise of a strong will, a believing spirit, and a self-sacrificing disposition. And when the interpretation of such lives is referred to the presence of a divine Spirit who lives in them and rules over them he can explain it by, and reconcile it with, the facts of life around him. He finds that the facts of his own life are now charged with a new significance. His sufferings, his temptations, his work, are filled with the same divine life, and ruled by the same authority, as the saints and heroes of the Bible story. As these men and women loved and served their country, and built up a civilization so different from that elsewhere in the world, he, too, will strive to make the life of *his* nation holy, *its* history too shall be a Bible, and the foot-steps of God shall be traced in the deeds of *its* heroes and the thoughts of *its* saints. He

becomes the conscious and willing instrument of God, learning the final lesson of all revelation—the purpose of God in the life of the individual and the race.

Thus by exhibiting the life of man in its normal human experiences as the basis and vehicle of a spiritual revelation, we secure a human interest in the record, win reason and conscience to the acknowledgment of the divine authority for morals, and show the spiritual life to be the end and crown of the natural. First that which is natural and then that which is spiritual; the physical process, as seen in the physical basis of morals, does not invalidate the spiritual result; nor does the fact that God chose the human instrument to carry out his purposes make the truth less authoritative or the influence on the soul less spiritual and divine. On the other hand, by showing how the presence of the divine in human life and history can alone give an imperative to the human conscience, and dignify natural law as the expression of a self-conscious moral intelligence, we give divine worth and nobleness to the normal human experiences of life, vindicating its sanity and its supreme glory as the crowning fact of God's creation.

To some Sunday-school teachers it may appear as if these were unnecessarily deep subjects, and it should not be supposed that anything like a philosophical treatment of them is expected of the ordinary teacher; but it is very necessary that the teacher of boys and girls of about fourteen years should have clear and intelligent ideas upon these points; for unless they have, they cannot make the connection between the natural and the spiritual which their work demands. It should be borne in mind that it requires the best kind of equipment, education and tact to make the simplest explanations of every-day facts when they are read in the light of the great themes of religion. And these are precisely the kind of questions which the youth are now asking, answers to which they expect from their teachers. Especially the boy of this age is groping for a ground of reality on which to rest his decisions for life. There is nothing for which he has more contempt than a mere pretense of reality, especially in religion. A temptation which is, after all, no real temptation, out of which the man was delivered by some miraculous power, and yet put forward to him as the life of a genuine man, at least confuses him. The moment he gets the impression that the Bible does not record the lives of real men, but only supernatural characters, he is done with it, for it loses all grip upon him.

To show the relation of the human and the divine in the lives of

men, the natural in harmony with the spiritual, and the spiritual as the crown of the natural, becomes the chief means of showing that all life is informed by the divine forces. In urging upon the youth the authority of God over his life, and the appeal of the Lord Jesus Christ to him for the love and allegiance of his soul, the teacher can thus show the valid ground for all the claims he makes, and awaken a human interest in the appeal. The youth finds himself in a familiar world and sees religion as the flowering of his nature, the fruitage of his best life. This seems a long, slow process, and we are often impatient of the indecision and hesitancy of the pupils in our Sunday schools; but the fault may lie with the teachers rather than the pupils, since the material for developing such decision may not be furnished them.

Nor should we here make the mistake of thinking that this method of instruction contemplates merely intellectual development. It would soon be found that the instruction needed would range over the whole field of moral suasion, tender appeal to the heart, and above all, strong, virile insistence of the moral authority of God, perhaps the most imperatively needed form of instruction in the present day. The boy should be taught that he has a divine Master, but yet that the Master of his life is his wisest and best friend. "Hasten slowly" is a good motto for the thoughtful teacher in the work of this formative period of the youth's life. Learn from the master-builder who puts a broad and deep foundation under the structure, which is to rise high and last long. Enrich his mind, draw out his reasoning powers on the moral and spiritual problems of life, touch his heart by the stories of patriotism and self-sacrifice, and he will be ready to appreciate the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Get a firm grip upon his manhood by showing him that he, too, is called upon to be one of the noble army of saints and heroes who have served God and their fellow-men, and you will give him grounds for religious conviction and decision which the maturer experiences of life will enrich and strengthen.

The methods of teaching outlined above will require special preparation both in the church and in the Sunday school. It will mean the educated supervision of the pastor in outlining and directing courses of instruction that start from a definite place and aim at a definite end. It will mean the intelligent adoption of the principles of pedagogy in religious instruction, and the reliance of our people on educational principles in the slow and normal development of the moral nature and the religious emotions. This may produce an entire revolution of our present system and the return to the catechetical, modi-

fied by modern knowledge of human nature and recent methods, by which the family idea of the church and the principles of race solidarity were so splendidly used by the early Christian church, and later by the Protestant churches, for the advancement of the Christian religion. This will place Christian instruction on a scientific foundation, leaving it no longer dependent on the sporadic interest of revivalism, which, however valuable it may be as a missionary propaganda, is not the best system of instruction in the way of life for children born into the Christian heritage.

The Protestant churches must reconsider what underlies the confirmation classes of the Episcopalians and Lutherans, the communion classes of the Presbyterians, and of all the other churches which found themselves face to face with the national problems of Christianity as distinguished from the individualism of the Methodists, the Congregationalists, and the Baptists. It is certainly not meant that there is no truth of importance in the evangelistic appeal to the individual conscience and will, far less than there is no force or value in the great truth of the change of heart by the operation of the Holy Spirit. But it is our contention that these truths, and the methods of religious instruction that have grown up lately under their dominating influence, are not the guiding principles in education, and ought not to determine the methods of Christian training for the young. The state of mind and heart which induces conversion should be cultivated by the long, patient process of instruction and development which accords with the laws of the child's growth, and the methods adopted should be determined by those laws.

The covenant of promise, the truth of race solidarity, the principles of heredity, and the proved efficiency of education as the means of winning the young heart to the love of Christ and the obedience of the faith, are the only foundations on which the Protestant churches can build a system of religious training certain to secure to the Kingdom a harvest of young lives in each succeeding generation.